

# Patrick White's Hungarian Connection

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## 1. Introduction

Patrick White's last novel, *Memoirs of Many in One* (1986), is quite different from his earlier, better known works. Although considerably shorter, it displays as wide a canvas as *Riders in The Chariot* (1961) and as deep a psychological insight as in *Voss* (1957) or *The Vivisector* (1970). Yet as opposed to the more conventional narrative format of his previous novels, *Memoirs of Many in One* is fashioned as a haphazard collection of fragmentary episodes, representing the memoirs of its old and probably senile protagonist.

*Memoirs of Many in One* doubtlessly deserves a thorough investigation, endeavored elsewhere<sup>1</sup> to truly appreciate its complexity. Within the present limitations, I would like to focus on one of the novel's many, ostensibly marginal, details which can nonetheless disclose the novel's underlying main structure, upon which White has constructed his unusual masterpiece.

The repetition of an unrelated and seemingly insignificant phrase, *The Tragedy of Man*—a phrase that appears both at the beginning of the novel and again towards its end, drew my attention. The phrase is written in italics, and one can thus conclude that it refers to a text. Since nothing in White's writing can be taken to be incidental or arbitrary, the very repetition of this phrase merited an inquiry. Indeed, *The Tragedy of Man* is the title of a dramatic poem published in 1861 by the Hungarian writer Imre Madách. White actually mentions Madách's name, alongside that of Goethe's, in close proximity to the title of the poem. Like a piece of a puzzle that suddenly clicks into place, the discovery allowed me to formulate a more comprehensive reading of the novel than was possible up to that point. In what follows, I would like to suggest that White used Madách's poem as the frame upon which he carefully constructed the novel. His allusion to this poem is made to reverberate both in the fashioning of his main protagonist and in the deployment of a double narrative structure within which this protagonist is made to function and is debunked at one and the same time.

## 2. Patrick White's Late Style

On many counts, *Memoirs of Many in One* fits within the concept of 'Late Style,' a style which Edward Said found prevailed in great artists' works during the 'last or late period of life, [when] the decay of the body, the onset of ill health or other factors . . . even in a younger person bring on the possibility of an untimely end' (Said 6).

When *Memoirs of Many in One* was published Patrick White was 74, and already very sick. He admitted he should really have spent years writing this novel (White, *Letters* 598), yet he knew his health was getting worse, and that is perhaps why he decided to be content with only two drafts of the novel before handing it over to his publisher (Marr, *Life* 624). White's achievement in writing *Memoirs of Many in One* is spectacular when one takes this fact into account, for he must have held the novel in his mind in its entirety to be able to put it down on paper in as short a time as he did. White said as much regarding *The Hanging Garden*, a novel

he had started in 1981: 'I shall come back to it as soon as I can; it is all in my head' (Marr, *Garden* 220). Alastair Niven has quoted these words, which White is reported to have said to his translator, Jean Lambert, in his very convincing argument concerning the format of *The Hanging Garden*. Although it is presumed that White left this novel unfinished, and taking into account that *The Hanging Garden* was only published posthumously, it is quite possible, as Niven claims, that 'on re-reading what he had already written, White felt that he had said enough, that the novel . . . was in fact finished' (Niven 281). *The Hanging Garden* and *Memoirs of Many in One* are roughly the same length, and by the time he wrote them, White was experienced enough to trust his creative powers even in a more concise format, in which he could deploy all the freshness, vitality and experimental energy a mature artist could perhaps allow himself more readily than a younger one, when finally released from earlier constraints.

Together with *The Twyborn Affair* (1979), and *Flaws in the Glass* (1981), *Memoirs of Many in One* makes up White's autobiographical trilogy. A part of this combined biography of White as an author, *Memoirs of Many in One* is especially poignant since White claimed, when referring to Alex, his main protagonist: 'she is me.' He even thought of having his picture taken as Alex for the cover of the novel (Marr, *Life* 626). White's identification with his character is reminiscent of Gustav Flaubert's defence of his own novel, when he famously claimed at his trial that 'Madame Bovary, c'est moi.' Jean-Paul Sartre explains this declaration in terms relevant to White's novel as well: the character

penetrates him [Flaubert] from the outside and is discovered to be himself in passivity, or if you like, he is himself the great creature lying between the lines, a creature that only the act of another will awaken. And through a drama with an inverted sense but an analogous structure, he can also pull the act from outside thanks to the beliefs his game inspires in others. (166)

The 'act of another' necessary for the awakening of his creation is clearly the act of reading, and White not only invested himself in his creature but his writing reflects his confidence in his readers' reactions for the full deployment and efficacy of the character in the text.

White's personal investment in *Memoirs of Many in One*, as well as its brevity and intriguing nature all point to a fresh approach on White's part, perhaps 'suggesting a resurgence of creative energy' (Said 44), although he is dealing with concerns similar to those that can be found in his earlier work. In his collection of essays entitled *On Late Style*, Said mainly discusses the works of Theodor W. Adorno, Richard Strauss, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, Luchino Visconti, Glenn Gould and Jean Genet. He claims that

the one thing that is difficult to find in their work is embarrassment, even though they are egregiously self-conscious and supreme technicians. It is as if having achieved age, they want none of its supposed serenity or maturity . . . yet in none of them is mortality denied or evaded, but keeps coming back as the theme of death which undermines, and strangely elevates their uses of language and the aesthetic. (Said 114)

White certainly displayed no embarrassment in his work, nor did he evade the issue of mortality, central in *Memoirs of Many in One* and already present in many of his other works.

Yet Said also found that Adorno's 'prose style violates various norms: he assumes little

community of understanding between himself and his audience,' and his autobiography, *Minima Moralia* is 'a cascading series of discontinuous fragments, all of them in some way assaulting suspicious 'wholes,' fictitious unities . . . whose grand synthesis has derisive contempt for the individual' (Said 14–15). White too appears to disregard his readers, presenting them in *Memoirs of Many in One* with a highly condensed text, made up of a series of seemingly unrelated fragments of a convoluted plot, further complicated by a long list of insignificant minor characters, as well as an avalanche of details of varying levels of importance, allusions, flashbacks, associations, symbols, and intertextual clues. Similarly to what Said says of Adorno's and Beethoven's late styles, White's late style too undermines 'our pleasure, actively eluding any attempt at easy understanding' (Said 104). Nonetheless, the novel is fashioned following a carefully crafted plan that amounts to more than the patchy recollections of its senile protagonist. Far from 'assaulting suspicious wholes,' or culminating in a synthesis that contains merely 'derisive contempt for the individual,' as Said found to be the case in Adorno's memoirs, White's novel points to a much desired and accessible whole, though, admittedly, it is a whole that will be denied to his main protagonist.

### 3. The Reception of *Memoirs of Many in One*

In discussing Cavafy's late style, Said claims that the prerogative of late style is that

it has the power to render disenchantment and pleasure without resolving the contradiction between them. What holds them in tension, as equal forces straining in opposite directions, is the artist's mature subjectivity, stripped of hubris and pomposity, unashamed either of its fallibility or of the modest assurance it has gained as a result of age and exile. (148)

Although White was not in exile, perhaps, as David Marr suggests, he was also not completely reintegrated within Australia, despite the fact that he spent most of his life there, and almost all his years as a writer (White, *Letters* 419; Marr, *Life* 277). To the extent that White's late style in *Memoirs of Many in One* can be considered similar to Cavafy's, what White's last novel certainly suffered from was its subsequent reception.

Bill Ashcroft explains the waning interest in White's works, especially after his death: 'he was too modernist, perhaps too literary, too transcendental, simply too *hard*' (Ashcroft 22). No doubt one of White's 'harder' novels, *Memoirs of Many in One* has received relatively little attention in comparison with his other novels. Critics mostly concentrate on thematic interpretations relating to political, linguistic, mystical, metaphysical or psychoanalytical issues, none of which can fully explain the art of this unusual text. Several critics found *Memoirs of Many in One* to be one of White's lesser achievements, among them Rodney Stenning Edgecombe, who qualified the novel as a 'lightweight work,' (Stenning Edgecombe 159) and Lawrence Steven's existentialist reading of White's works, who declared that 'if *Memoirs of Many in One* were representative of White's work . . . he would not warrant consideration as a major novelist' (Steven 153). David Tacey viewed *Memoirs* as 'an attempt to trivialize and abuse his [White's] work, to vent his rage upon his tragic fortune. There is a chilling awareness throughout of his own defeat.' He explains the main protagonist's behavior in terms of escalating madness, and opposes other critics who have become enraptured with her (Tacey, *Fiction* 201, 207). John Beston wrote that *Memoirs* is

not a serious work: it is a flight of fancy that White allowed himself at the end of his career as a novelist, and he spent less care on its structure, characterization

and style than in any previous novel . . . *Memoirs of Many in One* does not sustain the image of White as the careful craftsman that his previous novels convey. If one can accept the notion of Patrick White enjoying a romp at the end of a distinguished career, then this is that romp. (Beston 359–60)

More recently, Elizabeth Webby and Margaret Harris have labeled the novel ‘quirky’ (Webby and Harris 270).

Nonetheless, one must first and foremost turn to the novel itself in order to be able to suggest a different reading.

#### 4. Introducing Alex Xenophon Demirjian Gray

At the beginning of the novel, Alex Gray, the main protagonist of *Memoirs of Many in One*, is already dead. Her daughter Hilda calls upon Alex’s lifelong friend to try and make sense of her scattered letters and diary entries and edit the result into a memoir, although it is unclear how many of her writings are based on lived experience and how many on fantasy or delusion. The friend’s name is Patrick White, and the full title of this novel is, accordingly: *Memoirs of Many in One by Alex Xenophon Demirjian Gray Edited by Patrick White*. Introducing himself as Alex’s editor proves the endeavor to be a shared effort from the start: Alex and Patrick together present the reader with one composite psyche, made up of two complementary components.

Towards the end of her life, Alex sets out on a quest for meaning and self-assertion, which she proposes to achieve by artistic means as a theater actress. Although she is an unlikely character to embody modern ideals of eternal youth and self-fulfillment due to her old age and shaky physical and mental health, her artistic aspirations are implicitly condoned by her society. She may even elicit readers’ admiration for her disregard of her advanced age and its limitations, despite the ridicule her actions elicit. White fashions the society Alex lives in, as an Americanised, ‘all-for-me’ (White, *Memoirs* 146) society, which believes in transcendental, Romantic ideals of eternal youth and God-like artists who need to separate themselves in a desert or a forest to be able to create themselves and their Art. Yet whereas Emersonian characters devoted to self-reliance, or mythological American explorers, would abandon civilisation and go into the wilderness to fulfill their personal drives, Alex, ironically, barely leaves her house. As a child and younger woman, Alex underwent the sack of Smyrna, found refuge in Greece and lived in Cairo before arriving in Australia. Yet her scattered recollections, written in both past and present tenses, make it hard to pin down the time of the occurrences described in them. In addition, since memories, hallucinations and dreams are all treated in the same way, it is also difficult to decide what really took place. Her last theatrical tour in outback Australia, for example, can be construed, as Hilda and Patrick do, to have only taken place in her mind, while she was cooped up in her bedroom the entire time (White, *Memoirs* 123, 141, 143).

#### 5. The Double Narrative Strand of the Novel

The narrative of *Memoirs of Many in One* is difficult to follow, and seems to be altogether devoid of cohesion. Nonetheless, deciphering the reason for White’s allusion to Madách’s poem *The Tragedy of Man*, may clarify that the poem is used as a blueprint for a double-threaded plot. Like Milton’s *Paradise Lost* or Goethe’s *Faust*, this poem provides a version of the story of the fall of man from grace, resulting from Satan’s challenge to God’s power.

The skeletal structure of *Memoirs of Many in One* follows the lines of a mystery and morality play in two opposing renderings. The sub-plot is based on a traditional Christian reading of the biblical story of the fall, focusing on Adam: man, who has been tempted by Satan, falls from grace and as a result undergoes substantial change, due to his separation from God. There ensues a recognition of guilt and a new consciousness which leads to repentance. Man is then reconciled with God and the plot ends in a happy reunion of the lost son within the community of God. This sub-plot is represented by Patrick, who is unassuming and content with his role of editor, admitting his dependence on others in his endeavor to produce the memoirs we are reading. After Alex's death, Patrick manages to achieve a form of closure by following a trail of several stands in Alex's life, during a trip he takes with Hilda to Italy. On their return to Sydney, he is further rewarded by a union of sorts with Hilda, based on the sharing of a mundane and peaceful cohabitation, though he is also resigned never to be really rid of Alex (White, *Memoirs* 192).

The main plot, on the other hand, is represented by Alex. This plot-line presents a modern version of the story of Satanic rebellion, based on the common denominator White found between Goethe's *Faust* and Madách's *The Tragedy of Man*, namely Satan's defiance of God and his effort to overpower Him through the corruption of man, His prize creation. What results is an essentially romantic interpretation of the story of Man's fall in a subversive reading which focuses on Satan as the glorified defiant, who successfully separates himself from the family of God in order to create himself, convinced of his right to do so, as well as of his triumph. White uses the main plot in order to critically expose artists' conviction that they, like Satan, can succeed in becoming equal to God in their own creations. Alex is used as the embodiment of an ambitious, satan-like, would-be artist, who wishes to destroy conventions and deny her social links and responsibilities. This narrative, following postmodern trends, is fragmented from the start and becomes more fragmented as it proceeds. The protagonist, ultimately unable to say 'I,' disintegrates into a shattered I, graphically expressed as an 'I I I' form of expression, while the author seems to disappear.

Alex's megalomaniac ambitions are thus equated by White to Lucifer's. In Madách's poem, Lucifer is disdainful towards the other angels who praise God as their creator. Unlike them, claims Lucifer, he has been living since eternity, and is thus equal in power to God. Challenged, God answers, according to Madách:

THE LORD

I have planned it since eternity  
And lived inside me what's now created.

LUCIFER

And did not you feel a gap among your thoughts  
That encumbered all life you wanted  
And forced you to perform the creation?  
Lucifer has been the name of this gap,  
Who has been the spirit of negation.  
You triumph'd over me since it's my fate  
To go under always in my fights,  
But revive and be reforc'd again.  
You gave birth to matter— I won the space,  
Life is accompanied always by death,  
Happiness always by deep depression,  
Light always by shade and so doubt by hope.

That's all. I stand in all time where you are:  
 Thus, who knows you so, should I respect you?  
 (I. Madách, *The Tragedy of Man*, Scene I)<sup>2</sup>

Lucifer's answer points to God as the sublime artist, and in the same breath explains the nature of artistic creation, which by this definition is incomplete and flawed in essence. The artist creates out of an irresistible need to fill a gap he senses in his world. Unless there is a gap, all matter would be static with no alteration or shift of primordial matter. Lucifer is incapable of grasping God's explanation, namely that His creation is precisely the result of its original design, and its completeness is postulated on its gaps, a creative option that is only open to God. In addition, he knows his fate is to be triumphed over by God, yet claims an equal share in creation, ignoring his own confessed incompleteness and subordination to God. Accordingly, God's answer is ironical: he chases Lucifer out of heaven but grants him his 'creative portion,' the tree of life and the tree of knowledge. Lucifer is content, since these trees are enough to spread anarchy in God's world by tempting the vain Eve and the proud Adam. He is convinced the trees will soon serve to help him vanquish God.

## 6. Gaps and Fragments

The gaps in White's narrative are one of the tools he uses to frame his protagonist on the one hand, and to advance the plot on the other, according to his plan. What is not written—as much as the fragmentary information the reader is made to collect on the way—is significant in the inescapable net White has prepared for Alex. Pinning down the elusive aspects of the character, and by extension of the plot, is paradoxically more feasible when using a structure made of fragments and particularly wide gaps. The outcome of this technique is a text whose texture is very much alive, with the readers' active participation in connecting those scraps of information which are provided by the author. In addition, the emptiness suggested by gaps in the narrative resonates with Alex's quest for the absolute.

The closest Alex gets to a mystical experience, besides alluding to the Desert Fathers (White, *Memoirs* 144), occurs after her failed 'Dolly Formosa' act. She walks out of her hotel barefoot 'into the plain beyond . . . the desert' and says: 'if I were at least a shadow, but I am not, I am nothing now . . . Grain of mica. I drop to my knees.' In front of her is God in the image of man, a replica of herself: 'I look up and he is kneeling opposite in exactly the same position. We are a few yards apart. I cannot see his face, because it is gilded by the sun's glare' (White, *Memoirs* 138–39). At the end of this passage, Alex picks up her own picture from the street, and sees that her face too, like that of the god-like creature she saw in the desert, is 'blurred, it could be anybody's' (White, *Memoirs* 140). Alex is experimenting with the erasing of the self, but devoid of self-awareness, this scene has not brought her any closer to her professed quest for understanding the meaning of her life. Through Alex, White acknowledges the human wish to dissolve into nothingness in order to reach God, along with another manifestation of the same wish, the sensation of having attained a God-like self, a God-image inflating the self from within, swamping the self and causing megalomaniac eruptions such as Alex's last act at the theater. White is conducting a reversed motion towards ancient times, not necessarily directed at the ancient Gods or using older ritual institutions, but searching for a way which can give expression to the greater inner collective. He is not after an ontological or metaphysical answer for modern quests but an ethical one.

Like Lucifer, Alex's narcissistic convictions allow her to consider herself 'a candidate for canonisation' (White, *Memoirs* 107), 'god's understudy,' (White, *Memoirs* 87) one who

should replace Him altogether, and her art, like the trees in paradise, is the means to do so. Although she derides all traditional practices, Alex feels the need for absolution from her sins as her death approaches. She senses the strength of residual, fragmented ancient rites, which point her in the direction of a religious or mystic framework through which absolution may be obtained. Yet she is neither ready to undergo a spiritual process nor its ensuing transformation, but rather looks for a conveniently packaged and ready-to-use item. White derides each of her endeavours: her literal effort to clean her stolen lipstick in holy water at a cathedral stoup (White, *Memoirs* 39), her readiness to 'say a rosary or two' (White, *Memoirs* 111), or her willingness to have the dog she collects in the park along with a 'mystic' lick off her sins: 'Dog has been sent to atone for the evil I was born with—to lick me clean' (White, *Memoirs* 101). In case any reader has missed her game, Alex spells it out: 'Oh, Dog! Oh, God! He has landed on my bed . . . the purple tongue waiting to savour the salt of human flesh, or do his *real* job of absolving sin' (White, *Memoirs* 106). A 'big black dog' (White, *Memoirs* 87) was previously used by Goethe, as the earthly appearance of Satan in *Faust*. His satanic nature is also the reason a dog cannot be contained, as opposed to the 'mystic' Alex proposes to stash in a secret cabinet. Alex knows 'there won't be any question of a priest hole for a dog . . . Mystics can be contained . . . a dog never' (White, *Memoirs* 93). Alex wants forgiveness and absolution and has a vague notion this could be obtained from God, perhaps through a church practice, but she would just as soon embrace some other mystic mumbo-jumbo or the work of the devil if it provided her with both a cleansing of her soul and the power she seeks. She is convinced she can decide how to go about obtaining absolution, inventing her own ritual to fit her needs. The fragmentary texture of the narrative thus also serves White to reflect the haphazard, sketchy nature of his heroine's quest.

## 7. The Centrality of the Theater

Alex's memoirs present a series of separate scenes, very much like those an English medieval mystery play would stage, using a different pageant wagon for each 'tableau.' Rather than the scenes of a saint's life, each of Alex's life scenes depicts and mirrors a different community setting and each is a station on her double quest, for meaning and self-glorification on the one hand and for absolution on the other. Similar to mystery plays that did not maintain a plausible unity of space, and staged a multitude of locations and periods, Alex's adventures take place in Europe, the Middle East and Australia, with no distinction between past and present.

Framed as a morality play in its entirety, *Memoirs of Many in One* also contains several specifically theatrical episodes. On stage too, Alex's pursuits are the same and she performs a pantomime of ritual gestures, devoid of content. She goes down on her knees (White, *Memoirs* 138), and tries to clean herself by 'sloshing the sheets around, over the stone, rubbing them against the corrugated board . . . I am pure as this sheet I have laundered . . . I hold this glistening banner against the light. 'You wouldn't see a whiter sheet anywhere in Australia' (White, *Memoirs* 160–61). Alex remains unaware of the meaning of her symbolic activity, and cannot benefit from it in order to reach a responsible consciousness, any more than she can benefit from the rituals she alludes to and which she has emptied of meaning. Her private repertoire of penance will culminate in her 'finale,' performed in the backstage of the theater, the scene of her last judgment (White, *Memoirs* 161–64).

White uses various theatrical episodes to stage his the efforts of his 'Everywoman' to fashion herself as a unique actress through her appropriation of the staging and the text. Acting, for Alex, is a performance of subversion: she is convinced that in a modern theater, where

everything is permitted and all theatrical conventions have been torn down, she will be able to do as she pleases. What William Shakespeare so painstakingly constructed in his play *Antony and Cleopatra*, she busily deconstructs. As soon as she has the director under her thumb, she sets about re-casting actors, cutting out as many parts as she can. Having butchered the original text and cleared the stage so she can dominate it and shine as a single star, she takes over the part of Cleopatra, nicknaming her 'my Cleo,' and declares 'I *am* Cleopatra. I *know*' (White, *Memoirs* 123). Yet she could not be more remote from the historical and tragic figure of Cleopatra: while Cleopatra represented a whole nation, Alex has no retinue, other than a devoted daughter and an old friend. A self-proclaimed princess, her act is ludicrous, unprofessional and clumsy, a far cry from Shakespeare's great tragedy.

The choice of theater as a framing device for her aspirations introduces the very community she criticises and tries to evade as an *a priori* presence. In addition, the audience collaborates with her efforts at self-assertion, since she acts according to values this modern community considers legitimate and worthy of achievement. The constant presence of an audience of varying numbers, and by extension of readers, is also an ironical reminder of the impossibility of a complete detachment from the community.

Alex thus believes that by joining an anarchistic theater whose goal is to denounce society's evils and bring about its destruction, she can finally free herself from society's demands and express her artistic talents. Yet revolution by means of theatrical activity is hardly her invention, nor is it as much an anarchistic act as its supporters would like to believe. Wolfgang Iser explains that

the revolutionaries are still descended from the aesthetic idealists. Literature has become reality in the form of the anarchic game, but it is a fallacy to believe that by negating something, you have already grasped its otherness . . . With pure negation, the revolution remains dependent upon that which it negates' (Iser 200)

Though she happily joins a performing group called the 'urban guerillas' at the avant-garde Sand Pit theater, Alex herself calls the bluff of this kind of theater, when she terms the play she is about to take part in a 'non-revolutionary revolutionary play' (White, *Memoirs* 167).

## 8. The Artist and His Community

Alex claims she is willing to sacrifice everything for her art. Yet despite her grandiose declaration, all she sacrifices is her husband and her children, for the sake of her own selfish pleasures. Her husband blamed her for turning their home into nothing more than 'a stage for your [Alex's] performances' (White, *Memoirs* 27), and she awkwardly admits to her part in his suicide. Deriding her daughter, she is ungrateful for her total dedication, and she criticises and estranges her son. Her delusional escapade to the Dobbin's cottage by the sea is a pathetic reversal of roles, through which Alex tries to return to a childlike state. This episode ends when she is taken back by Hilda and a policeman, who don't seem to understand about the burnt loaves of bread, 'about the babies my surrogate mother and I had prepared for their holocaust' (White, *Memoirs* 51). The image of 'a Moloch tearing the kid's charred flesh' (White, *Memoirs* 82) also adds to the notion of a brutal severance from children, though ironically, in this segment, which takes place on the Greek island of Nisos, the kid is a goat's kid, and she is a childless nun in yet another of her all-too-literal attempts to attain enlightenment.



On her probably imagined theatrical tour of the outback, she declares ‘rebuffs [are] what we expect when we lay our necks on the block for art’ (White, *Memoirs* 128–29). In Jungian terms, wholeness within the self can only be achieved on condition that one accepts the ‘decapitation’ of the ego-King and its shifting from its royal seat, followed by a conscious acceptance of the importance of the place of the other within the self. As Jung explains:

the unrelated human being lacks wholeness, for he can achieve wholeness only through the soul, and soul cannot exist without its other side, which is always found in a ‘You.’ Wholeness is a combination of I and You, and these show themselves to be parts of a transcendent unity. (82–83)

Jung adds in a footnote, that he does not mean the synthesis of two individuals, but ‘the conscious union of the ego with everything that has been projected into the ‘You.’ Hence wholeness is the product of an intra-psychic process which depends essentially on the relation of one individual to another’ (82–83). In this novel, White establishes that even though artists may be today’s accepted heroes, they too must be able to control their consciousness in order to come in contact with collective elements. It seems that White relies in this context on the Jungian archetype of the Great Individual.<sup>3</sup> As Erich Neumann notes, in archaic time, while Great Individuals were chiefs, medicine men, or divine kings, nowadays these are artists, prophets, and revolutionaries. He goes on to explain that

the archetypal canon is always created and brought to birth by ‘eccentric’ individuals . . . the creators form the progressive element in a community, but at the same time they are the conservatives who link back to the origins . . . by means of the symbol, the archetypes break through the creative person into the conscious world of culture. It is this deeper-lying reality that fertilizes, transforms and broadens the life of the collective, giving it and the individual the background which alone endows life with a meaning. (Neumann 126, 376–77)

Only in such a way can the artist make order of the internal chaos we all share, and turn dreams or piles of paper into organised works of art.

In *Memoirs*, the drama is not confined to the stage but also takes place among the people Alex derides yet depends upon as an audience for her theatricals. White demonstrates that she is not only part of her community but that more importantly, whatever she does, this community cannot be taken out of her system. After a performance, she is invited to a buffet, where the Pavlova ‘was a masterpiece of the Country Woman’s craft. A passion-fruit seed made straight for the only hollow tooth in my head and stayed there to martyrise me’ Alex reports (White, *Memoirs* 135). The irony in White’s use of a passion-fruit seed to physically represent the community in Alex’s existence is not lost: the passion of Christ is both shared by the community and is itself a cornerstone in its constitution, a sacrament she is unwittingly made to swallow. Nonetheless, when she bites into the cake, she does not understand the clue the passion-fruit was to give her, namely the participation of the community not only as her audience and as judges of her genius, but in her own existence.

Alex’s religious search is also put on the same level as her theatrical endeavors. Both at the theater and in her various mystical experiments, she is prepared to go to great lengths to reach her goal, yet none of her actions bring her any closer to the profound understanding she seeks. She grasps everything literally, blind to the implications of her acts, convinced it is enough to go through the motions, in pantomime fashion, in order to reach her spiritual goal. She tries to

concoct her own rites, made of bits and pieces of various religions, of mysticism and psychology, none of which ‘work,’ since rituals have no meaning outside a community frame.

## 9. Personal and Collective Elements

The use of four different genres of writing—epistolary, biographical, diary writing and drama—within one text, delineate four textual strategies Alex is allowed to practise when she tries to evade her own story, before she is brought to a stop and cannot write anymore. A textual dimension is thus added to her theatrical rebellion against her society and to her mystical efforts to detach herself from her community. Each of the four genres of writing serves Alex to further her ambitions, seemingly working against her writer by rebelling against a more conventional and linear rendering of the plot.

Alex is hard to contain, about to burst at the seams. She is overflowing, like her many pieces of paper spilling out of her writing case and suitcase. As White clarified, when she is taken to a mental institution, having shot blanks at the audience of her last performance, writing could have been a means of healing, a method of personal reintegration. Writing a diary is a possible form which could contain and frame one’s mind according to collective ideals, as White has shown in his novel *A Fringe of Leaves*. There, Ellen is urged by her mother-in-law to keep a journal—‘a source of self-knowledge and as an instrument of self-correction’ (White, *Fringe* 73)—in order to improve herself, the writing of which is an ethical task which necessarily involves an act of confession. Memoirs, which are written retrospectively, are also conducive to self-investigation and they shape the memory of events in a certain way. Since Alex cannot integrate the social self within her self, she is not able to write either. At the mental asylum she is brought to an abrupt full stop on the paper the nurse gives her and can no longer write (White, *Memoirs* 174).

In *Memoirs of Many in One*, White underlines the importance of structure by providing an editor, whose job it is to make sure there is a shape to this disheveled character. Yet Alex’s memoirs, as a text, remain fragmented, confusing and hard to follow despite Patrick’s editing. This is a textual expression of the intractable, overflowing collective elements within Alex, which she would rather ignore than confront. These collective elements burst out during her final performance, when Alex herself assumes the form of the ‘huge predatory bird’, its claws about to tear into the entrails of her audience in the name of her creativity (White, *Memoirs* 168).

Alex isn’t surprised that her psychiatrist, Professor Falkenberg, was waiting to take her to the asylum (White, *Memoirs* 169)—the same psychiatrist who had her committed in the past (White, *Memoirs* 22). Professor Falkenberg’s name is reminiscent of both falcon and mountain—a reference to the myth of Prometheus alluded to by White in the novel. White emphasises the layering and co-existence of the myth into modern times by having Alex try to oppose it as she declares, on her way to a high-society cocktail, that ‘I refused myself the luxury of fossicking through the past, perhaps ending on some Aegean rock, my liver pecked at by a great predatory bird, its beak shaped like a scimitar’ (White, *Memoirs* 66).

Professor Falkenberg and Alex perform their life-long wrestling duet, in which Falkenberg endeavors to manipulate Alex’s faltering hold on reality by quoting Madách’s poem to her, highlighting the psychological aspect of White’s use of the poem. Their pairing constitutes a reverse image of that of Adam and Eve in Madách’s romantic poem, in which Eve is the one who supports Adam’s growing desperation.

After they are chased from heaven, Madách's Adam and Eve are led by Satan along the centuries, from Ancient Egypt to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In each period they 'act out Humanity's tragic destiny in their struggle with Lucifer,'<sup>4</sup> as Adam endorses one historical figure after another, such as the Greek Miltiades, Tancred, Kepler or Danton. Adam thereby becomes vividly aware of man's achievements but also of man's folly. Eve appears at the end of each period and refreshes Adam's gradually weakening body and spirit. The penultimate scene is a futuristic ice-age, where an old and hopeless Adam declares he wishes to kill himself. In the last scene, Adam is awakened from his dream, a young man once more. Eve announces she is pregnant, restoring Adam's hope but also making him fall to his knees and proclaim that God has vanquished him. The poem ends with God's words of encouragement to Adam and Eve, and with his admonition of Satan and a reminder that his every deed follows God's intention:

And you too, Lucifer, you are a link  
 Within my universe—and so continue:  
 Your icy intellect and fond denial  
 Will be the leaven to foment rebellion  
 And to mislead—if momentarily—  
 The mind of man, which will return to me. (scene 15)

White redirects these words at Alex, whose thirst for freedom is like that of Prometheus, the self-reliant artist. Yet while he was bound to a rock as a punishment for giving light to humans, she is the prisoner of her own aspirations, and only seeks self-enlightenment. As implied by White's allusion to the poem, artists are never as free as they imagine: Madách proves to Adam that in his various future existences he will have to follow in his ancestors' steps, reenacting history's glorious moments as well as its defeats. Similarly, White reminds Alex and her fellow theatrical 'urban guerilla' revolutionaries (White: *Memoirs* 158–59) that they could benefit from their cultural heritage, rather than flee from it or presume to reinvent it. Moreover, not only are they incapable of detaching themselves from society but through their rebellion itself they constitute another link to it.

## 10 Fragments and Unison

Two kinds of fragmentation that White exposes play a major role in the text: the fragmentary philosophy of modern society, and the fragments of older traditions which emerge in the modern plotline. As Sanford Budick points out, 'although we are accustomed to thinking of the phenomenon called tradition as a handing down of an integral whole of meaning . . . it is far more accurate to say that, on the personal as well as the public levels of our experience, cultural tradition exists only as a participation in a constellation of fragments' (Budick 225). White's novel is a clear example of the fragmentary inheritance modern culture must be content with: the older, morality plot is apparent in fragmented form within the text of the modern plot, itself a mere collection of fragments. The artist, according to White, is the agent who can convey the fragments he feels he is made of himself: White claimed that he became a novelist since he was composed of many characters (White, *Letters* 39), an option that 'would not work if the writer's own character is not sufficiently fragmented,' (Marr, *Life* 151). Writing *The Vivisector*, another novel in which White examined the creative processes of an artist, this time a painter, could only be accomplished once White 'discovered ways of achieving the kind of fragmentation by which I convey reality' (White, *Letters* 319). Thus reality for White is not only made of fragments but in turn can only be portrayed by using fragmentation as an aesthetic method. In this sense too, his particular late style is similar to Beethoven's, whose late works, according to Said 'cannot be reconciled or resolved, since

their irresolution and unsynthesized fragmentariness are constitutive, neither ornamental nor symbolic of something else' (12–13). White's work, like an impressionist mosaic, can best be appreciated in its entirety and from a distance, as part of his complete vision.

White's use of two parts of one character provides a unifying pattern. Together, Alex and Patrick, female and male, each upholding artistic pretensions while being at the same time the other's critic, form one consolidated character made of all its coexisting fragments. While Alex embodies modern individualism in the name of creativity, Patrick counterpoints her by acting out the need to acknowledge one's inner plurality and responsibilities. Instead of her rebellious rejection of her community that results in fragmented separation, Patrick's plot ends in a recognition of his shortcomings, and in a pragmatic fulfillment of aspirations: as an editor he does not presume to be a creator. Ultimately, White seems to prefer Patrick's acceptance of a marriage-like relationship with Alex's daughter—the wholesomeness Hilda's boiled eggs provide him and the banality of the tooth paste he shares with her—to Alex's separatist egomania.

Towards the end of the novel, Alex is transferred from the asylum to St Damien's hospital, where she is closer than ever to a ritual community, though she is not a Catholic. Surrounded by nuns who probably provide her with last rites, she is dying. At the last moment, 'when the last of human frailty makes contact with the supernatural,' she makes an effort to raise herself from her pillows: "'Is it this—then . . .?'" she whispered, whether in horror, or ecstasy' (White, *Memoirs* 183). No one around her presumes to know what 'this' is, what Alex saw at her dying moment, and whether she gained some great understanding. She did not undergo the change necessary for reconciliation with her community and with the collective component in her self. She is thus denied the moment of recognition White allowed another dying character, in a short story entitled 'The Age of Wart.' On his deathbed, the protagonist discovers the wart he had caught from his best friend when they were children has grown back, and his friend is beside him.

He is holding my hand in his. I who was once the reason for the world's existence am no longer this sterile end-all. As the world darkens, the evil in me is dying. I understand. Along with the prisoners, sufferers, survivors. It is no longer I it is we. It is *we* who hold the secret of existence *we* who control the world WE. (White, *Uneasy* 27–59)

The key to human existence lies in human relationships, between two friends, between all the 'we' that constitute an individual's outer and inner society, without which one remains sterile.

## 11. The Author's Role

In his last novel, White found an original and uncompromising way to orchestrate major concerns, already present in his earlier works, and distilled even further in his late works. In addition to exposing hubris as the artist's original sin, Madách's poem is useful to White since it touches upon universal elements with which every artist must contend: the artist's necessary involvement and commitment towards his community, as well as his instrumentality in putting his readers in touch with their cultural heritage as an essential ingredient in their lives and in their future. The allusion to Madách's poem is clarified from an additional angle, since the poem was written as part of the rebirth of the national Hungarian ethos. White would have probably known the poem in theatrical form, which is consistent with his presentation of Alex in various theater productions, although Madách's poem was performed in the theater for the

first time only after its author's death. The work 'has always been the subject of scholarly, ideological and political debate, as well as being constantly in the repertoire,' though the poem received 'disparaging comparison to *Faust*', according to Tamás Koltai (147). Madách's popularity in Hungary was initially based on his poem's arousal of national feelings. The Hungarians had believed Hungary could one day liberate itself from the French under Louis XIV's rule, without outside help.

This belief, born out of the utter hopelessness of Hungary's future . . . has remained a characteristic trait of the astonishing and for many readers incomprehensibly optimistic conclusion at the end of the profoundly pessimistic poem *Thoughts in The Library* (c. 1850) by Mihály Vörösmarty and Imre Madách's drama *Tragedy of Man* (c. 1860). (Lendvai 132)

It is possible that Madách's poem also appealed to White in the context of his political and social engagement on the Australian public scene. In addition, by turning to European literary origins such as Goethe and Madách, White clearly warns Australians of the dangers lurking for a society in which the collective unconscious has been unleashed and allowed to ravage the streets. The figure of Satan is an embodiment of modern individualism which can cause, among other things, blindness to one's social responsibilities towards others. Megalomania, and the inflation of the self which is also embodied and represented by Satan, is made to reverberate in the novel in respect to Hitler. Australians or Americans dancing at the 'Adolf Hitler Hotel, Washington DC' as Alex does (White, *Memoirs* 44), must be reminded that what happened in Germany can happen anywhere else. Collective contents must be contained by artistic means among others, in order to be safely accessible by all.

White's use of the character of an editor bearing his own name as the one responsible for the text is a professed act of humility on his part as a writer. Like Alex, who is ultimately cleansed of her vanity in the asylum (White, *Memoirs* 171), White admits that a creative artist can only co-create a work of art, using those collective elements he manages to come in touch with, in the midst of the society that shares his cultural roots. For White the creative ego is thus a compound one, an 'I I' as Alex expresses when trying to become a creator. Yet creators have a grave responsibility. When Alex is about to perform for a last time, a performance that will end when she shoots blanks at her audience, she says: 'I am the Creator. Perhaps for that reason I am afraid of what I let loose, of what I have created' (White, *Memoirs* 166). Alex portrays the unleashing of collective archetypes which have erupted due to the failure of the safe channeling of the social spirit, no longer contained in traditional institutional frames. Alex is Patrick's nemesis, as much as he is her critic and the critic of today's artists who believe they are free to create themselves and to break all boundaries, sheltered by an aesthetic which permits every transgression of moral values.

Alex does not manage to create very much but she demonstrates—negatively—the notion of the responsibility that lies on the creator's shoulders. By being able to use images from the collective unconscious 'pool' the creator can bring dangerous archetypal contents into the open, incorporating such content in his art. Modern society, unwilling to go back to past moralities, must find modern ones to contain its archetypes. White's work suggests that we could draw on older traditional frames which can help bond the members of his readers' community, since they contain elements of the collective imagination and memory that are still decipherable and therefore meaningful even in this day and age. It is the artist's political duty to create, to speak up, and as White realised, an artist cannot succumb to despair, or he will 'let down so many people'; instead, the artist must pull himself together and rally people

to ‘save the world in these days of political cynicism and dishonesty,’ yet in order to do that ‘we must unite . . . we all have our contribution to make—whether in a bag shop, a deli, or as artists . . . it is our duty to start exorcising hate and suspicion; to unite—all of us—in creating faith in life and humankind’ (White, *Speaks* 151–58).

## 12. Conclusion

To emphasise the presence and significance of the collective in the psyche of his protagonist, White chose multiple theatrical scenes for her final quest for absolution and illumination at the end of her life. The theater was a meaningful part of White’s own life. Introduced to the theater by his mother at an early age, it ‘filled some of the gap in . . . [White’s] solitary childhood and youth,’ (White, *Flaws* 244) and became a passion, a place ‘which, in its artificiality, was more real than any room [he] knew, the actors with their exaggerated accents more desirable than actual people’ (White, *Flaws* 54). As David Marr remarks,

had White been able to act, he might not have written a word . . . his imagination was essentially theatrical, and the best of White’s characters are not only astonishing inventions but great performances. At his desk he acted all the roles. When he spoke of the creative process, he used the language of the theatre. (Marr, *Life* 494)

White thus not only wrote many plays but his prose writing too provided a scene for his own acting out of the many characters he felt himself to be made of. He confesses that ‘I only have confidence in myself when I am another character,’ (White, *Speaks* 23) and that ‘as an artist, my face is many-faceted, my body protean, according to time, climate, and the demands of fiction’ (White, *Flaws* 153). The centrality of theater to his later life is apparent in White’s report of how much he enjoyed the revival of his play, *The Season at Sarsaparilla*, which became much more successful than its reception fifteen years earlier (White, *Flaws* 246). This success provided White with a renewed opportunity to work with younger people, and drove home the notion that he had been ‘wrong and vain enough to think I could get along under my own steam—just as years before the egotist in me had rejected God as unnecessary’ (White, *Flaws* 243).

As opposed to his protagonist, who tried to use—and misuse—the theater for her own egotistic purposes, White’s renewed interest in the theater in the last years of his life provided him with colleagues and friends, whose ‘voices persuaded [him] to write plays,’ (White, *Flaws* 246), and White proceeded to write *Big Toys* (1977), *Netherwood* (1983), *Signal Driver* (1983), and *Shepherd on the Rocks* (1987), in the same decade as he wrote his autobiographical trilogy. In these theatre pieces and in his other fiction-writing, White portrays group portraits staged through group practices, bringing out the psyche and showing its expression. Fragments of traditional rituals are introduced in plays as well as in prose, intertwined with modern ritual games, all relying on communal existence. Undoubtedly, the same communal commitment easily detected in his last plays also finds expression in his last novel.

The character of Alex was from the very beginning of the narrative a vessel for the presence of intrinsic, hereditary spirits in the text. The first time that White allowed Alex to speak, when she considered starting her memoirs, she was not sure where to begin. ‘In any case THEY will be watching, from inside the house, from the garden, the Park, or most disturbingly, from above’ (White, *Memoirs* 17). This passage, immediately followed by Alex’s

forgetfulness of her husband's death, her old cat's death, and the allusion to her previous hospitalisation in a mental institution, reinforces the reader's conviction that Alex is suffering from dementia. Yet it is through this least likely character—a madwoman, who denies her community and her responsibilities to her family—that White chooses to demonstrate that the spirits of the past can be accessed, suggesting at the same time that they can probably be accessed easily if readers care to listen to their voices, since they are everywhere all the time, in the house, in the park and most disturbingly, above us.

In writing *Memoirs of Many in One*, White may have tried the patience of several of his readers and angered his critics. His peculiar 'late style' consisted in condensing his message into an intricate yet altogether realistic whole for the slow digestion of future generations.

## NOTES

1 Patrick White's *Memoirs of Many in One* was one of the main texts examined in my study of the functioning of a narrative tool I termed a 'literary mask.' This tool enables writers to transcend boundaries between fictional and historical realities, thereby impacting historical reality: by using literary masks, writers may rally their readers into activating the text, and potentially bringing about an alteration to social norms. See: Nourit Melcer-Padon, 'Towards a Description of the Mask Function in Literature: An Historical and Theoretical Investigation Centered in the Works, Artistic Inheritances, and Intellectual Ambience of Luigi Pirandello and Patrick White,' Dissertation. Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2009, print.

2 The translation of the poem is taken from: Imre Madách, 'The Tragedy of Man'. Trans. Ottó Tomschey, 2000. <http://mek.oszk.hu/00800/00876/00876.htm>, accessed June 06, 2015.

3 Several critics have discussed White's work in Jungian terms, yet from a different perspective: David Tacey viewed White's works as variations on the theme of the archetype of the Great Mother (David J. Tacey, 'Patrick White: The Great Mother and her Son,' *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 28, 1983. 166). Another Jungian critic, James Bulman-May, deciphers what he considers to be White's alchemical code and finds that in *Memoirs* White 'paraphrases Mercury's statement, thus acknowledging his lifelong dedication to the alchemical process' (James Bulman-May, *Patrick White and Alchemy*. Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2001. 19). Karin Hansson found a metaphysical and psychological background to White's work in both Jung and Blake, and drew attention to the use White made of symbols, repetitions and recurrent patterns, pointing to the 'simultaneous existence of static and dynamic components in White's fiction' (Karin Hanson, *The Warped Universe: A Study of Imagery and Structure in Seven Novels by Patrick White*. Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1984. 26). Patricia Morley claims that White's mystic vision is ultimately Christian, though influenced by Jewish mysticism (Patricia A. Morley, *The Mystery of Unity*. New York: Harper Torch Books, 1965. 2–3). Laurence Stevens considers White's texts to be dealing with 'human wholeness emerging from dissociation' rather than from transcendent realms (Laurence Steven, *Dissociation and Wholeness in Patrick White's Fiction*. Ontario: Wilfred Laurier UP, 1989. 6, 12). David Coad examines religious and metaphysical aspects in White's work (David Coad, *Prophète dans le désert. Essais sur Patrick White*. Villeneuve d'Ascq, France: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1997).

4 See: *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. 'Imre Madach,'

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/355557/Imre-Madach>. Accessed 1 December 2014.

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